

THE LIVING BURNS*

SOME writers have been appropriated by readers in such a direct and spontaneous way that for those readers at least they largely escape formal consideration as literature. So it has been with the Defoe of *Robinson Crusoe*, with Dickens, and with Burns. I can still remember the slight shock that came when, as a young student, I found Dickens duly ticketed among the Victorian novelists; up to that time Dickens had been simply a field of experience, or area of life. The same can be said of Burns, for many readers of many generations. This status may go along with academic or critical neglect, and with the accumulation of a kind of lore which we may call the higher gossip—keeping count of the inns where Mr. Pickwick stayed, or of the lasses who come and go through Burns's life. So it has been with Dickens, though here the situation has been changing rapidly, with a new biography and a new approach in criticism. I do not find a similar change for Burns, in spite of the excellent work of scholars like De Lancey Ferguson, with his definitive edition of Burns's letters, and of David Daiches, who brings to the subject a special knowledge of Scotland and an exceptionally acute literary judgment. For all that and all that, Burns may be in a sense universally known, but he is not included in the very selective kind of "major authors" anthology that seems to dominate university instruction, and he has not become the subject of close explication, like Pope, Donne, Eliot, or Gerard Manley Hopkins. "Burns's songs

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want singers, not explicators," writes a careful student of the subject, Robert Thornton. That may well be, but now that his life and after-fame add up to two full centuries and his name has gone around the world, his work more than ever deserves direct and serious attention, something beyond the careless and affectionate glance and touch we give to the familiar.

We have to begin at a particular point in Scotland. Burns's father came from Kincardineshire, but the poet spent most of his life in central Ayrshire, and his verses must be read with due attention to the dialect and special background of that area. Old Ayrshire should have her poet, says Burns:

Ramsay and famous Fergusson
 Gied Forth an' Tay a lift aboon; a boost
 Yarrow an' Tweed, to monie a tune,
 Owre Scotland rings;
 While Irwin, Lugar, Ayr, an' Doon
 Naebody sings.
 ("Epistle to William Simson")

Even such close regionalism draws here on general pastoral tradition: a poet is inspired by and intimately associated with his particular river—Virgil with Mincius, James Thomson, Burns's fellow countryman, with

 the *Tweed* (pure *Parent-Stream*,
 Whose pastoral Banks first wak'd my *Doric* Reed,
 With silvan *Jed*, thy tributary Brook)
 (*The Seasons: Autumn*).

The region makes a difference, whether our man is a Borderer like James Thomson or Walter Scott, a Glasgow callant like Tobias Smollett, a St. Andrews student like Robert Fergusson, a Westland Whig like Thomas Carlyle. But the region does not make all the difference, and can be submerged in the broader distinctions between Highlander and Lowlander, between the Scot and the Englishman.

One thing that eighteenth-century Scotsmen had in common was the problem of making a more or less willing accommodation to English culture. Along with this went the substantial loss, whether deplored or not, of a current literature of high cultural significance in the Scottish tongue. In our own age, a period of acute nationalism, this story has been told again by ardent Scottish patriots. At the Reformation the old court culture of Scotland, closely linked with the Continent, had gone down, and the conscious literary energies of the country, reduced by the Reformation, were largely absorbed into the dominant English current. In the eighteenth century, at least from the point of view of the academic and professional circles of Edinburgh, this was considered a good thing; the elimination of Scotticisms from writing was necessary for approval—and from speech too if possible. James Thomson, brought up on the Border and educated at Edinburgh, won literary success in London with the publication of *Winter* in 1726, a poem of about four hundred lines with hardly a single Scots word and with Scottish local color carefully submerged. During this period Scottish literature properly so called lived a partly subterranean life in the ballads and folksongs, treasures of which the common folk were the keepers, though the currency of songs depended somewhat on published collections.

It is also important for Burns's background that standard eighteenth-century practice admitted the use of informal and conversational verse in established modes of a humorous and playful kind. In Augustan verse, one thinks of Prior, Gay, and Swift here. Moreover, earlier Scots literary tradition was rich in forms that were available for revival and imitation, and came to be systematically imitated in the generation from Ramsay to Burns. These forms are worth naming, for

they are all prominent in Burns's work—mock-elegies (often for animals or living people), humorously exaggerated and abusive personal satires in the manner of the "flyting," poems on country fairs and other amusements of the folk, and verse epistles from one poet to another, full of compliments and invitations to sociability. We are likely to think of Burns as having a stanza form of his own:

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
 To see oursels as ithers see us!
 It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
 An' foolish notion:
 What airs in dress and gait was lea'e us,
 An' ev'n devotion!

But this was a traditional form, called "Standard Habbie," after a mock-elegy on Habbie Simpson the piper by Robert Sempill. There is one striking negative point here; the popular ballad strictly so called does not affect Burns deeply. With Scotland's rich treasure of ballads, and the emerging practice of ballad imitation in the eighteenth century, it may be hard to understand why Burns did not try his hand more often in this kind. In his relation to folk-poetry Burns thought of himself as a collector and adapter of songs, and went some distance afield to find them, but his primary feeling seems to have been for the sentiment, the music, and the locality of the song, rather than for the full body of historical tradition. He has such a strong turn for personal expression that he never identifies himself with the ballads that were meat and drink to Walter Scott.

It is unnecessary to urge the point that Burns was a man of literary culture though not of formal academic training. He got his literature where we all have to get it, largely out of books. The erroneous idea expressed in Henry Mackenzie's phrase "the heaven-taught ploughman" would hardly be

worth discussing except that the idea is part of literary history, so that Burns himself took it from contemporary English writers. The motto on the title-page of the Kilmarnock edition shows how Burns caught up this idea and applied it to himself:

The simple Bard, unbroke by rules of art,
He pours the wild effusions of the heart;
And if inspir'd, 'tis Nature's pow'rs inspire;
Hers all the melting thrill, and hers the kindling fire.

He here writes the language of contemporary English poetry, which we are unwilling to accept from him. It is not a question of being literary or not; the question is what literary models are best for him. Those that the half-submerged and half-slighted native Scottish tradition gave him were closer to and better adapted to the situations that inspired his verse—the old violent way of satire for his outbursts against tyranny and hypocrisy in the Kirk; the verse-epistle for his camaraderie; the songs for innumerable moods and occasions. Yet there were complications and there is no denying that Burns got into some trouble with his two languages and literary traditions. We must consider the practical problem that confronted him when he sought to appeal to the literary public of his day. He had to comply with current British taste to some extent. In a novel by Agnes Maria Bennett, *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* (1797), a character quotes Burns and in some following comments remarks: “Shenstone’s sonnets must always be felt—and there is an uneducated man in this country whose soul is Shenstonian, though his poetry do not strike so much, because it is not so polished, but the Scotch plough boy will delight you in the woods of Athelane, with a Scotch glossary by you, without which you cannot understand half his beauties.” In that curious mixed performance, *The Vision*, Burns’s local muse

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Coila, supposed to represent the spirit of Scottish poetry, makes a long speech in standard English, including an imitation of *The Rape of the Lock*. She sketches his humble youth and his apprenticeship to poetry in artificial terms, and advises him to be content even though, as she says,

Thou canst not learn, nor can I show
To paint with Thomson's landscape glow;
Or wake the bosom-melting throe
With Shenstone's art;
Or pour, with Gray, the moving flow
Right on the heart.

Yet the opening of the poem contains good Scots stanzas. Burns gives a humorous and realistic restatement of this same notion of his humble status as a bard, in a well known passage in the first Epistle to Lapraik.

I am nae poet, in a sense,
But just a rhymer like by chance,
An' hae to learning nae pretence,
Yet, what the matter?
Whene'er my Muse does on me glance,
I jingle at her.

Your critic-folk may cock their nose,
And say "How can you e'er propose,
You wha ken hardly verse frae prose,
To mak a sang?"
But, by your leaves, my learned foes,
Ye're maybe wrang.

What's a' your jargon o' your schools,
Your Latin names for horns and stools;
If honest nature made you fools,

What sairs your grammars? What good are your grammars
Ye'd better taen up spades and shoofs, shovels
Or knappin'-hammers. hammers for breaking stones

A set o' dull, conceited hashes blockheads
Confuse their brains in college classes!
They gang in stirks, and come out asses, young bullocks
Plain truth to speak;
An' syne they think to climb Parnassus
By dint o' Greek!

Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,
 That's a' the learning I desire;
 Then tho' I drudge thro' dub an' mire puddle
 At pleugh or cart
 My Muse, though hamely in attire,
 May touch the heart.

O for a spunk o' Allan's glee, spark
 Or Fergusson's, the bauld an' alee,
 Or bright Lapraik's, my friend to be,
 If I can hit it!
 That would be lear enough for me. learning
 If I could get it!

This passage may do duty as an illustration of Burns's attitude toward his own work in the vernacular. First, note that his claim to be a child of nature is stated with gusto and exaggeration. The attack on learning has the humorous extravagance of the old satiric tradition. He is not seriously proposing the abolition of classical studies. No one innocent of books could have written these lines, nor are the books to be limited to the works of his Scottish forerunners, Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, mentioned in the last stanza. Indeed, the very passage—

Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,
 That's a' the learning I desire—

may come from one of Burns's favorite books, *Tristram Shandy*: "Great Apollo! if thou art in a giving humour—give me—I ask no more, but one stroke of native humour, with a single spark of thy own fire along with it—and send Mercury, with the rules and compasses, if he can be spared, with my compliments to—no matter" (III, xii). But be they Sterne or be they Scots, the verses are characteristic Burns. It is an ancient and honorable tradition to disclaim rhetorical arts, like Chaucer's Franklin, when he says that he has never slept on Mount Parnassus, or studied Cicero. Closer to Burns, the disclaimer of learning frequently appears in the informal

verse-epistle of eighteenth-century Scotland, the very pattern Burns is following.

The idea of nature in place of learning connects with the ideas of spontaneity, improvisation, and rapidity. The presence of nature's fire does not mean that the poet is innocent of literary plans or techniques, but that he has his resources at instant command, and makes a direct frontal attack. This speed and directness are among the most striking qualities in Burns. They are connected with various literary devices, and yet Burns expresses them in the most direct colloquial way:

When'er my Muse does on me glance,
I jingle at her.

Or take the beginning of the second epistle to Lapraik. He resolves to write a letter:

Sae I gat paper in a blink,
An' down gaed stumple in the ink;
Quoth I, "before I sleep a wink,
I vow I'll close it;
An' if ye winna mak it clink,
By Jove, I'll prose it!"

"Down gaed stumple in the ink." "Down went the pen into the ink." The very gesture is built into the verse. Burns has a familiar name for his pen, "stumple," as if it were an animal frisking about. This same pen had dashed off a conclusion to the first epistle:

But to conclude my long epistle,
As my auld pen's worn to the gristle,
Twa lines frae you wad gar me fiddle, make me fidget with joy
Who am most fervent,
While I can either sing or whistle,
Your friend and servant.

Note that the difficult rime-pattern of the Standard Habbie stanza enables the poet to show his speed and skill at the high hurdles. In general the Scots forms promote speed

within the stanza, but bring it up short at the end with a short line or lines. They are for the sprints rather than the distances. When Burns is at his best we can feel him driving forward like his own Tam o'Shanter—

Tam skelpit on theo' dub and mire,
Despising wind, an' rain, an' fire.

Such natural movement in verse is a priceless gift, and is often though not invariably associated with verse narrative. There is little extended narrative in Burns, except for the incomparable *Tam o'Shanter*, but this same movement appears in verse-epistle, mock elegy, satire, lyric. Rhetoricians recommended it; many a writer tried for it; Burns had it by nature. He depended on the duration of this natural flight for his effects, and wrote no long poems. *The Jolly Beggars*, the longest of his important works, is characteristically a series of stirring dramatic lyrics, with rapid connecting recitative.

The action of *Tam o'Shanter* centers about one short ride—it is only two miles from Ayr to Kirk Alloway, but note how this single situation is anticipated, approached, prolonged, presented with varying tempo which then accelerates to its climax. It is fashionable nowadays to analyze narrative technique closely. A glance at *Tam o'Shanter* will show that the direct attack and narrative speed are far removed from literary naïveté. The story breaks off abruptly as Tam's good mare Maggie crosses the brook and leaves her tail in the clutches of the witch Nannie. Tam's return home to his wife Kate is not told. But Burns has already given all we need know of this in his rapid opening sketch, his preview of the entire action—the sitting late at the ale, the rough ride home, the shrewish wife, her denunciation of Tam's drunken ways and her prophesying that

late or soon
 Thou wad be found, deep drown'd in Doon,
 Or catch'd wi' warlocks i' the mirk,
 By Alloway's auld haunted kirk.

The Holy Fair is full of motion from the time the poet meets the three hizzies, Fun, Superstition, and Hypocrisy, "skelpin up the way," to the description of the crowds on the road and milling about from the preaching tent to the change house, and the account of the preachers' performances in the pulpit. This is in a traditional stanza, eight alternately riming lines plus a short line at the end, a reduction of the old bob and wheel, as it was called; the refrain pulls the stanza up short, and always ends with the word day, "Fu' sweet that day," "Fu' gay that day," etc. Each stanza tends to have its little independent cycle of action, often embodying within itself the incongruous mixture of the devout and the profane that runs through the piece.

Here some are thinkin on their sins
 An some upo their claes;
 Ane curses feet that fyled his shins,
 Anither sighs and prays

One of Burns's favorite characters, "Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie," is always in action, always in motion. Though the flaming pit is his home he travels far, like a raging lion, riding the tempest, ranging about with witches and warlocks. In *Tam o'Shanter* it is old Nick himself who blows the bagpipes with redoubled power. Dr. Johnson's comment on Gray's "Bard" comes to mind here: "His ode which begins

Ruin seize thee, ruthless King,
 Confusion on thy banners wait!

has been celebrated for its abruptness, and plunging into the subject all at once. But such arts as these have no merit,

unless where they are original. We admire them only once; and this abruptness has nothing new in it. Nay, we have it in the old song of Johnny Armstrong, 'Is there ever a man in all Scotland.' " What Johnson thinks of as a mere rhetorical trick is much more than that, but it is interesting to note that he uses an example from Scottish balladry.

By this mode of attack Burns imposes a unity upon his best work which overrides the matter of language. This should be kept in mind as we touch on the thorny subject of his use of the Scots vernacular and of standard English. An oversimple statement would be that Burns at his best relies on his native speech, though, as a literate man, he can express himself in standard English. But it is not enough to say that Burns had a choice between the two languages. The linguistic situation was complicated: the King James version of the Bible was the best known and most quoted book in Scotland, and determined the diction of religious discourse; letters were regularly written in standard English. In the verse of Burns and his contemporaries standard English is used to a varying extent, but if the poem is what was uttered then and there ("AE" had the expression, "I said a poem") then many words written in standard spellings in the Burns text must be pronounced as Scots. Perhaps the most familiar example is the moralizing passage near the beginning of *Tam o'Shanter*:

But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed, etc.

What is Burns doing here? He passes from the genial and gross coziness of the alehouse to delicate images approved by elegant poets—the petal of the poppy, the snowflake, the iridescence of the northern lights or the rainbow. But this playful elevation is more effective if it still carries the Scot-

tish tone. Mr. Douglas Young points out that the lines might be read:

But pleesyers are like poppies spraid,
Ye seize the fleur, its bleum is shaid, etc.

Then we go on:

Nae man can tether time or tide;
The oor approaches Tam maun ride, etc.

Thus the whole poem would move along with an organic unity of language.

When natural movement slackens or fails, the question of language is more likely to come up in an embarrassing way. Here the signal, indeed the notorious example is "The Cotter's Saturday Night." This poem, which I was brought up to revere, has now fallen from its high position, and can be admired only in parts. It is in Spenserian stanza, which acts as a clog on Burns, and not only impedes but makes impossible his characteristic brisk attack. The entire stanza, not merely the Alexandrine at the end, "like a wounded snake drags its slow length along." Instead of entering spontaneously into the life of the family circle in all its phases, Burns often turns aside to point up an approved moral. Thus the visit of the "neebur lad" to Jenny, which comes in well, leads quite gratuitously to the stock seduction theme. We are too painstakingly informed at every turn that the cotter and his family are industrious, poverty-stricken, virtuous, and devout. With the piety and the patriotism as standards or ideals we cannot quarrel. Who can deny that, as Burns says,

From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs,
That makes her loved at home, revered abroad?

Burns here improves on a passage in Thomson's *Summer*, ending the description of the sheep-shearing scene:

A simple scene! yet hence Britannia sees
Her solid grandeur rise.

But at best this praiseworthy generalization in Burns is adequate, not original or unique. And so with some other anthologized pieces, such as "To a Mountain Daisy," which Burns in real life would call a "gowan," and "A Bard's Epitaph." When Burns was on this kind of good behavior he was likely to say "bard," but in more relaxed moods he was likely to refer to himself as "a certain bardie." Perhaps the fairest way to treat such a line as "From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs" is to say that it expresses a belief which is one of the conditions of Burns's poetry, whether it is itself poetry or not.

One finds such generalized patriotic ideas very close to the theory and practice that underlie the songs. "By the way," he writes in his *Commonplace-Book*, "these old Scottish airs are so nobly sentimental that when one would compose to them, to *south* the tune, as our Scotch phrase is, over & over, is the readiest way to catch the inspiration and raise the Bard into that glorious enthusiasm so strongly characteristic of our old Scotch poetry." The words are conventional—"nobly sentimental" (that is, containing noble sentiments),—"inspiration," "the Bard" again, "glorious enthusiasm"—these were worn currency in Burns's day, but were still, for Burns, legal tender.

In his later years Burns sometimes thought of turning toward established English literary models, and of doing ambitious work that would not duplicate his successes in the Scots vernacular. He was often advised to do so. He even thought of trying his hand at drama. Instead, and very fortunately, the last nine years of his life yielded the great body of his contributions to Scottish song, pieces variously adapted and created from old titles, airs, fragments, and complete texts. During this period he had a main hand in about 350 songs. With the directness and simple humanity that have

won his best songs world wide popularity, we find an economy and a sureness of taste that defy analysis. What he took over from tradition, air and words, often set the tone and mood, or the "sentiment," as he would say. Simple and familiar as the best of these pieces are, the range of tone and effect is great, the artistry resourceful and sure. The emotion is often presented by a simple image—the red, red rose, the melody played in tune. But there is almost never any elaborate play with the image—any complication of the symbol.

The humorous songs—"Duncan Gray," "Willie Brew'd a Peck o Maut," "Whistle and I'll Come t'ye, my Lad"—are richly colored with the Scots vocabulary; the serious pieces are often barely tinged with Scots. There are different shadings here, however; as William Allan Neilson once pointed out, Jean Armour in Mauchline is addressed in Scots, Mary in Heaven and Clarinda in Edinburgh in English. A touch or flavor of dialect is sometimes enough to impart tenderness or familiarity without sacrificing elevation. That most patriotic of songs, "Scots Wha Hae," has artificial or synthetic Scots, not spoken Ayrshire, in the first two lines, thereafter almost straight English. "McPherson's Farewell," which has the very essence of Scottish outlawry, has Scots words only in the chorus. And these results cannot always be predicted from the subject; in *The Jolly Beggars*, to take a striking example, Burns seems to feel that he is following an international tradition of roguery and vagabondage, and puts some of the songs and the great concluding chorus into standard English.

There is no need of elaborate demonstration that Burns's characteristic impetus comes out in the songs. We have a swift and simple incorporation of imagery and a strong sense of direction. A rather exceptional piece will afford brief illustration. In "Bonnie Peg-a-Ramsay" we have the movement of

nature, but no strong sense of direction, and no clear relation between person and person.

Cauld is the e'enin blast,
O' Boreas o'er the pool,
An dawin it is dreary,
When birks are bare at Yule.

Cauld blaws the e'enin blast,
When bitter bites the frost,
And, in the mirk and dreary drift
The hills and glens are lost:

Ne'er sae murky blew the night
That drifted o'er the hill,
But bonie Peg-a-Ramsay
Gat grist to her mill.

Andrew Lang comments, " 'Malvolio's a Peg-a-Ramsay,' but the history of Peg is lost, like her character." The innuendo in the last lines pulls us up short, with a glimpse of social ironies behind the dreary landscape. Modern Scots poets prize such an effect, ironic and static. It is not common in Burns. Such a contrast as is merely hinted at in these lines is usually spelled out clearly. As in the satires, sharp antitheses often organize the humorous songs:

Duncan fleech'd and Duncan pray'd;	implored
Meg was deaf as Ailsa craig.	

First when Maggie was my care,	
Heav'n, I thought, was in her air,	
Now we're married—speir nae mair,	ask no more
But whistle o'er the lave o't!	

At the risk of seeming pretentious it may be said that Burns's lyrics are characteristically a powerful symbolic projection of action and passion in time and space, as in the lines so deservedly praised by Yeats:

The wan moon sets behind the white wave,
And Time is setting with me, O.

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Even in the slow tempo of "Auld Lang Syne" the shared reminiscence of childhood is translated into action and movement, with a heightened consciousness of space and time: "We twa hae paidelt in the burn"—"Seas between us baith hae roared." The social scene powerfully presented can be discerned in the songs as in the longer poems, and nature continues to be primarily the setting for human interests and affections. This limitation is the source of Burns's power. As we can read in our own day in *Dr. Zhivago*, "Only the familiar transformed by a genius is truly great."

ALAN DUGALD MCKILLOP